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Crossing Eurasia: Trans-regional Afghan Trading Networks in China and Beyond

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Abstract

An expanding body of literature in the field of Central Asian studies has brought attention to the problems of considering the region's complex dynamics through the lens of its nation-states. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the role played by trans-regional circulations in connecting parts of Central Asia to the wider world. This paper situates ethnographic work on trans-regional networks of Afghan traders in China, Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom in relationship to literature on trans-regional connections and circulation societies. Ethnographically the article demonstrates the multi-polar nature of these trans-regional networks, and the importance of trading nodes, especially the Chinese city of Yiwu, to their formation and ongoing vitality.

Keywords: Yiwu; trans-regional networks; Eurasia; Afghanistan; trade

Introduction

This article focuses on trans-regional networks of Afghan traders that are organised principally around the export of low-grade commodities from the city of Yiwu in China to wholesale markets in a wide range of settings. It seeks to bring empirical attention to Yiwu's significance as a node for these networks and the connected commercial activities of Afghan traders in China, the former Soviet Union, and Western Europe. An emerging body of scholarship exists on networks of Pakistanis and Central Asians in China, especially in the Uyghur Autonomous Province of Xinjiang (e.g. Erkin 2010; Haider 2005; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). Despite the historic presence of Afghan trading networks in China (Kim 2004), the nature of their current trading activities in China remain undocumented. Afghan merchants are playing however an especially visible role in the trading dynamics of Yiwu - a city in China's Zhejiang province that has come to be known globally as a key hub for the provisioning of low-grade commodities.

The article considers these dynamic Afghan trading networks in relationship to recent scholarship on trans-regional circulations and the 'alternative geographies' these help to forge (e.g. Amrith 2013; Freitag and von Oppen 2010; Ho 2006). Work on such trans-regional circulations has shown that scholarship which treats regions as fixed geographical categories tends to reduce the status of intermediary locales (such as Afghanistan) to that of marginal 'borderlands' (Green 2014). Resultantly, there has been insufficient recognition of the ways in which such trans-regional contexts and their inhabitants have acted both historically and in the present-day as 'corridors of connectivity' that forge links between apparently disconnected spaces (Christelow 2012; Marsden and Hopkins 2012; Van Schendel 2002). Recognition of the wider connective significance of settings formerly treated as peripheral borderlands has resulted in detailed empirical studies of 'circulation societies', notably networks of traders and/or religious personnel, that are defined in terms of their sustained mobility and capacity to forge connections between disparate contexts (e.g. Aslanian 2014; Falzon 2004; Henig 2014; Markovits 2000; Markovits et al. 2006; Trivellato 2011). This article builds on this literature in order to analyse the capacity of Afghans to both work and live in the global trading centre of Yiwu, as well as to connect it to trading nodes beyond.

In addition to illuminating connections between regions that do not conform to conventional geographies, studies of 'circulation societies' have led area studies specialists to revisit earlier discussions concerning the 'artificial' nature of scholarly geographical categories (e.g. Hodgson 1963; Kroeber 1945). Kroeber pointed toward the limited nature of conventional geographical categories and emphasised instead the analytical value of the expansive 'Eurasian Oikumenê', which he defined as a 'great web of culture growth, extensive in area and rich in content' (Kroeber 1945, 9-17). More recently, scholars who have advocated that geographical categories should be treated as concepts that can be 'adopt[ed], adapt[ed] or abandon[ed]' in relationship to their particular research concerns

(Green 2014, 557), have concurrently emphasised the need to recognise the ways in which categories are constantly imbued with political significance. One area of scholarly debate that has been fed by recognition of the tensions that emerge at the intersection of the scholarly and political use of geographical categories concerns the relationship of trans-regional geographies to historic orderings of space and territory. It would be tempting to suggest that the trans-regional Afghan trading networks explored in this article represent thus a manifestation of a 'new Silk Road'. Doing so, however, would erase modern history from discussions of the relationship between the past and the present (Canfield 2008; Ho 2006; Kwon 2010; Liu 2011; Marsden and Hopkins 2013). Concepts such as the 'new Silk Road' perform manifold forms of 'political work'; this inevitably raises concerns about their status as analytical concepts (Reeves 2011a). 'Eurasia' is another trans-regional 'macroregion' (Hann 2012) that at first sight appears helpful in the analysis of Afghan trading networks. But the category of Eurasia is also often deployed for diverse pragmatic and political purposes (e.g. Kotkin 2012; Hann 2014). Nevertheless, critiques by social scientists of geographical categories such as Eurasia and the Silk Route are not simply designed to dissuade scholars from using them: regardless of the ways in which geographical categories are used politically, they may nevertheless help to describe the contours of the contexts within which agents and practices interact (Kotkin 2012) or, alternatively, inspire utopian attempts to envisage alternative global histories and futures (Hann 2014).

In addition to bringing attention to the dynamic and trans-regional nature of Afghan trading networks, this article therefore seeks to encourage reflection on the implications that work on trans-regional circulation societies has for the study of Central Asia. By focusing on mobile communities and social actors, scholars of Central Asia have emphasised the analytical problems that arise from considering the region's dynamics through the lens of its nation states (Liu 2011; Reeves 2011a; 2013; Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014). Ethnographic studies have demonstrated the insights that studies of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia (e.g. Reeves 2011b; 2012; Sahadeo 2011) and of networks comprising religious specialists that crisscross Central, West, and South Asia (e.g. Marsden 2012b; Mostowlansky 2014; Durdoignon 2007) shed into the understanding Central Asia's dynamics. There have, however, been fewer attempts to explore ethnographically the types of sustained forms of trans-regional patterns of circulation that help to mediate Central Asia's relationship to the wider world. The connective networks of Afghan traders discussed in what follows, I suggest, constitute a form of everyday experience that continues to be sustained in the context of a world of guarded nation-state borders, politicised civilisations, and rigidly defined customs unions. This paper suggests that Afghan traders form a circulation society and that a close consideration of this illuminates modes of self-understanding that are less centralized, unified, identity-focused, and complete than those described in conventional studies of Central Asia (Kotkin 2007, 518).

Trans-regional Afghan Merchants

A consideration of the biographies of individual Afghan traders who are commercially active in Yiwu reveals two broad sources of historical influence on the formation of the networks they form. On the one hand, Afghan traders emphasise that they are uniquely suited to being global commodity traders because of the role that people from the territories that currently make-up Afghanistan have played as trans-regional merchants between South and Central Asia (e.g. Hanifi 2011; Hopkins 2009). On the other hand, many of the traders also say that they have become traders because of their experience of conflict and dispersal resulting from the 'cold war' (*jang-i sard*) that 'turned hot' (*garm shud*) in Afghanistan.

Afghan traders do not form a homogeneous 'social group', but are differentiated according to markers of status, wealth, and position in trading hierarchies; such forms of difference also intersect with, yet are never simply defined by, the traders' 'ethnic' and linguistic identities. Traders do identify with particular 'ethnic groups' (e.g. Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik, and Pashtun), yet most if not all traders have business partnerships with men who identify with communities different from their own.¹ The past ideological and political affiliations of the traders also reflect Afghanistan's modern political history: some worked as state officials and were directly affiliated to the Afghan socialist movement (through membership of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) and trained in 'Party Schools' in Central Asia, others fought on the side of anti-Soviet mujahidin organisations. More recently, many traders form commercial relations with people from political factions they once opposed.

The networks are therefore influenced both by the forms of modern cultural nationalism promoted by political organisations such as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and by the historic participation of Afghans in distinctively Muslim networks of commerce and intellectual exchange (e.g. Cooke and Lawrence 2005; Voll 1994; cf. Bayly 2004). The identities of those who make-up the networks are also informed by the past participation of many of the traders in the global 'socialist ecumene' (Bayly 2007). All of these varied influences are visible in the multi-dimensional nature of the traders' self-understandings.

Yiwu: Global Trade Node

Yiwu, in China's Zhejiang province and about 2 hours by high-speed rail from Shanghai, is a city of approximately 2 million inhabitants that is home to the International Trade City or Yiwu Market, founded in 1982 and currently under the administration of the Zhejiang China Commodities City Group Co., Ltd. Yiwu has come to play a central role over the past decade in 'globalization from the bottom-up' (Mathews, Lins Ribeiro, and Alba Vega 2012), especially in relationships to its status as a hub for the worldwide trade in low-grade Chinese commodities (Hulme 2015; Pliez 2012). Yiwu Market is made of a complex of two markets: Futian Market and Huangyuan Garment Market (opened in 2011). Futian market is divided into five 'districts' that hold a total of 70,000 shops selling 1,700,000 different types of Chinese-made 'small commodities' for the wholesale market. The commodities sold range from toys to bags and purses, souvenirs, hardware items, and jewellery. The market is

organised spatially according to the different types of commodities traded there. Huangyuan Market hosts another 5700 shops selling exclusively jeans, sport wears and other types of garments. According to the market's website, these goods are exported to more than 200 countries across the world, and approximately 1500 containers leave the city each day. Most shops in the International Trade City either purchase the goods from factories located elsewhere in China, and store them in warehouses in the city, or are outlets for particular factories.

It might be assumed that the enormous global trade in low-grade commodities is overwhelmingly organised remotely through multi-national companies, on-line purchasing, and electronic money transfers (e.g. Levinson 2006). A visit to Yiwu, however, demonstrates just how far this neat vision of the ordered movement of goods lies from the real worlds inhabited by many commodity traders. Travelling to and being physically present in Yiwu is central to the practices of global commodity traders, who must contend with the risks of being sold faulty goods or seeing the arrival of these in their home ports delayed by the production process, customs officials, and port closures (e.g. Bodomo 2012; Li Zhang 2008; Yang Yang 2012). Traders from all over the world, especially Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, travel to Yiwu to provision goods and export these to the markets in which they work. Yiwu thus is a major meeting point for such trading networks, and itself a 'site of interaction' for traders (Amrith and Harper 2012).

In addition to the great range of foreign merchants active in the city, Yiwu is also home to communities of people of Muslim background from elsewhere in China, especially Hui Chinese-speaking Muslims (many being migrants from Yunnan), and Uyghurs from various locales across Xinjiang province (notably the ancient trans-Himalayan trading post of Yarkand). Yiwu's Muslims - foreigners and Chinese citizens - gather on Fridays at the city's mosque (a former silk factory) that was completed in 2012, thanks to donations made by local and foreign Muslims. As elsewhere in China, Hui Muslims own 'Muslim restaurants' that cater to Chinese and foreign Muslims in Yiwu (Gladney 1996); they also act as translators for Arab-speaking traders (Simpfendorfer 2011). Uyghurs in Yiwu are also active in restaurant and street food businesses as well as being influential actors in the overland export of Chinese-made goods to markets in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.² These goods are mostly freighted by road and train to Urumqi and Kashgar and then sent on either trucks or cargo trains to Central Asia. In Central Asia, Chinese Uyghurs own shops in large wholesale bazaars and also work through local business partners.

It would be tempting to think that Afghan traders cultivate close relationships with Uyghur and Hui Muslims in China, yet my ethnographic data suggests that such relationships are considerably more varied. On the one hand, Afghan traders owning business in Yiwu, especially hotels and restaurants, do employ Hui Muslims as cooks and waiting staff because this reinforces the halal status of their businesses. On the other hand, the traders often tell

me that Uyghur Muslims in China are untrustworthy and that they prefer to build relations of both trade and intimacy (including of marriage) with ‘proper Chinese’ (*chinoyi-i sahi*) who might be prone to lying but are nevertheless skilled workers. As is the case with other trading networks, Afghan traders working in China and the former Soviet Union hold a pragmatic and flexible attitude towards the role played by public forms of religion and piety in the constitution of their networks (e.g. Israel 2005; Marsden 2015a).

Kabul to London and Yiwu

I now explore the case of Gul Agha, an Afghan trader currently based in Yiwu.³ Gul Agha’s biography reveals the interplay of the historic participation of ‘circulation societies’ with modern forms of globalisation in the emergence of contemporary Afghan trading networks. His patterns of mobility and activity also vividly highlight the open-ended, dynamic, multi-polar and dispersed nature of Afghan trading networks.

On the occasion of our first meeting in February 2013, Gul Agha had been in Yiwu for 3 months. He had come from London for a short visit in order to buy furniture for a Lebanese restaurant he was establishing in London. After talking with some of his Afghan co-nationals, however, he decided to stay and open a restaurant. Having been introduced to a Pashto-speaking Afghan man who had been working in Yiwu for the past decade (acting as a shipping agent for Afghan wholesale traders based in the town of Stavropol where he also owned a business), Gul Agha established a business partnership (*sharik*) and raised the required funds to open a restaurant serving Afghan and Middle Eastern dishes in Yiwu. Some weeks before the commencement of the Chinese New Year celebrations, he and his business partner fitted out the kitchen, got a visa for a cook from Pakistan who had previously worked for Gul Agha in London, and employed several Hui Muslims from Yunnan as local chefs and waitresses.

Unsurprisingly, trade during the Chinese New Year was slow for Gul Agha and his team and Gul Agha spent much time wondering what was to become of his restaurant, how a short trip to China had turned into a complex business venture, and on what grounds he had entered into an active business partnership with a man he had neither previously met nor known about. ‘For some reason’, he remarked to me, ‘we trust each other although we have never met before and are from different regions of Afghanistan. On what grounds we do so I am not sure’. Gul Agha did know that the man with whom he had entered a business partnership had a reputation amongst Afghan traders in Yiwu and beyond for having been one of the pioneers in the trade of Chinese-made commodities to Central Asia, Russia, and Ukraine. According to Gul Agha and other traders, Afghans became active in the import and sale of Chinese goods in the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Initially, they travelled to the western city of Urumqi to purchase the commodities in which they dealt. By 2000, the traders increasingly sourced these goods in Yiwu’s thriving small commodities market. Gul Agha explained the success of Afghans in the domain of international trade in terms of the historic importance of nomadism to Afghan society:

My new partner used to come to Urumqi and then travel with the goods on truck convoys back to his base in Russia before people began shipping goods by sea. We Afghans can move around so easily because it is in our history – my own family, on my mother's side, were nomadic people who each year moved between the plains of Samangan in northern Afghanistan and Jalalabad in the east of the country.

Gul Agha had left Afghanistan after his family had found it impossible (in the wake of the Soviet invasion (1979) to maintain their business in dried fruits. As Shah Mahmoud Hanifi (2011) and Benjamin Hopkins (2008) have both documented, the cultivation and sale of fruit were one of the central niches that connected nineteenth century Afghanistan to external markets. As the family had business connections in London, as well as a bank account in the city, he said it was easy for them to move their assets to the UK and be granted refugee status and eventually citizenship. Gul Agha knew mid-way through his university education in London that he would have to help his uncle manage his business activities. By the late 1990s, his uncle was running an array of pizza shops, hardware stores, an Afghan restaurant (one of the first in London), and even a 12 bedroom hotel in a seaside on England's South Coast. Having directed his efforts for several years towards bringing some type of 'system' to his uncle's business activities, Gul Agha wanted to establish a business in London of which 'to be proud' (*fakhr*), and so he chose to open a Lebanese restaurant. This restaurant had led him to the city of Yiwu: his paternal cousin (who owns rental properties in London) had told him that it would be cost effective to purchase the fittings for the restaurant in Yiwu and ship them to the UK.

Some weeks after having opened the restaurant in Yiwu, Gul Agha was joined by his wife (an Afghan British national) and the couple's two children. His wife worried that after three long weeks in the city, she still hadn't picked up any Chinese; though, she was relieved that her children had been admitted in an international school. Gul Agha's wife commented to me that she would not find it difficult to adapt to life in China because 'it's a mix of Western and Afghan culture, and so I know it well'. Gul Agha himself said that the opportunity that a stay in the city offered their children to learn Mandarin was indispensable. Ultimately, however, he told me that he did not wish to stay in the city but move to Hong Kong – a city in which he said he could both run a successful business and pass a well-lived life.⁴

Gul Agha's personal history and commercial activities in Yiwu point towards the simultaneous importance of both historic participation in trading networks and commercial cultures and the effects of the global cold war on Afghan society to the activities of Afghan trading networks. His life history also points toward the importance of mobility and the ability to forge linkages between settings – often in the most precarious of circumstances – to the self-understandings of individual traders, and to the dynamics of the wider networks they form. In turn, this underscores the importance of conceptualising mobile Afghans who travel for trade in China not one-dimensionally as refugees or survival strategy traders but as people who form vibrant and dynamic trading networks that coalesce in international commercial nodes such as Yiwu (Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015).

Go To Yiwu! – There are more Afghans there than anywhere else!

A brief walk down the city's central boulevard, points to the impressive impact that traders of Afghan background are having on the city. Afghans have settled in the city and run transport companies and shipping agencies that send goods not only to Afghanistan and South Asia, but also, as the advertising boards of their businesses proclaim, to 'the entire world' (*tamom-i duniyo*). Alongside cities such as Dushanbe, Moscow, and Odessa in Ukraine, Yiwu functions as a node of Afghan trans-regional 'entrepreneurial and affective life' (Arsan 2014, 9).

There are four Afghan restaurants in Yiwu. The visibility of Afghans in Yiwu's restaurant and hotel sector reveals the collective nature of their economic strategies and the wider role that Afghans are playing in the provision of sites of interaction for the city's trading communities. Nile Green has argued that Persian travellers to China in the first decades of the twentieth century relied on the 'infrastructure of European-led globalization rather than the old *musafir-khanehs* of the Silk Road' (2014, 12; cf. Constable 2003). In the 2000s Afghan traders in China are likely, during their trips to Yiwu, to visit hotels owned by their compatriots. These are certainly not the *musafir-khanehs* (traveller's lodges) of the old Silk Route but the variety of functions they fulfil outweighs that of a 'hotel'.

Many of the men who work as agents and run transport companies assemble each evening on the tables outside one such Afghan-owned hotel complex. This important site of Afghan sociality in Yiwu is a hotel aimed directly at Muslim travellers: on its seventh floor there are a number of trading offices offering brokerage and transportation services to Afghan merchants visiting Yiwu and also a mosque (rather than merely a Muslim prayer room). The clientele at the hotel complex is diverse: Afghan merchants bring their Chinese translators (*tarjuman*) and agents (*commission kor*) to lunch for hearty dishes of *qabili palaw* (rice cooked with meat and raisins). The hotel is owned by Yama, from Parwan, to the north of Kabul. Yama took a circuitous route to Yiwu: he fled the Taliban in the late 1990s and sought refuge in the UK (mostly staying in Stoke-on-Trent). After his case for asylum was rejected by the UK government he returned to Kabul where his brother had launched a wholesale furniture business. Yama subsequently travelled to Yiwu and opened a trading office that facilitated the export of furniture to Afghanistan. Having established this business, Yama was tempted to enter the hospitality sector, and reminisces today that he knew nothing about being a restaurateur when his 'hotel' opened. Now, however, his 'pizza Ariana' has achieved fame across the city.

The Afghans permanently based in Yiwu act as brokers between their co-nationals and Chinese factory owners, run transport companies (*shirkat-i transporti*) and commercial warehouses (*gudom*), provide credit to Afghan traders, and act as money dealers and transfer agents (*hawaladar*) (cf. Monsutti 2005; Thompson 2011). A few traders have shifted their activities in the city from the field of brokerage to industry, such as Hamid, originally from Ghorband, who has lived in Moscow since 1986. Before Hamid moved to

Russia, his father was involved in the official credit-based exchange of Afghan natural resources for Soviet manufactured goods (see Kalinovsky 2011). Hamid has recently opened a factory in Yiwu making silvery jewellery for the Russian market.

Most of the merchants who visit Yiwu come to buy goods from the famed 'small commodities' market. Those who travel to the city from Afghanistan purchase goods that they ship home, mostly using the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. The containers then travel overland and enter Afghanistan at the Islam Qalah border post. Those who trade in lighter goods (such as clothing) continue to use overland routes that connect China to Afghanistan by way of the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The significance of these routes has waned as sea transport has become faster and more efficient. Additionally, these overland routes are also considered risky by the traders because the borders between Central Asian countries (such as that between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) are often abruptly closed to commercial traffic - this can result in traders failing to deliver goods to their Afghan customers on time, or paying large sums of money as bribes to border officials. An Afghan market trader in Odessa told me, for example, that he had left Afghanistan and begun to trade in Ukraine having gone 'bankrupt' after a consignment of Chinese mobile telephones he was supplying to the US military had arrived to Kabul late because of disruptions caused by the Hann-Uyghur clashes in 2009 in Urumqi.

Many Afghans in Yiwu travel to the city not from Afghanistan but other places across the former Soviet Union, or *shurawi-i sabiq*. In Russia and Ukraine, Afghan merchants import Chinese-made commodities (especially of toys, souvenirs, hardware, and electrical goods). Traders active in Russia and Ukraine mostly transport their commodities on cargo ships by the container load, largely to the Black Sea port of Odessa and to Russia's Baltic ports. Importantly, the emergence of commercial rail routes between China and Russia that offer a faster and generally cheaper mode of transporting goods means that smaller scale traders increasingly transport their commodities overland rather than by sea; this development will inevitably lead to changes in the geographic dispersal of Afghan traders and the location of their commercial nodes.⁵

Afghan trading activities in Russia and Ukraine currently revolve around two nodes. The Sevastopol Hotel in Moscow is a group of buildings that was built for the 1980 Olympics, and is now home to two 16 story buildings (*korpus*) that contain Afghan trading offices and retail shops that are known collectively as the 'Homeland Trading Complex'. In addition to the Afghan traders who run offices and shops in the complex several hundred Afghan men also work as porters (*arabchi*) moving the goods between the warehouses and the shops. The other major node of Afghan trading activity in this arena is Odessa's 7-km market: this 'container market' is supplied by ships arriving at the Black Sea port of Ilychevsk (see Humphrey and Skrivskaja 2009). These two trading centres are themselves connected to regional trading nodes in which Afghans also work such as Stavropol, Kharkov, Krasnodar, Kiev, Rostov-on-Don, and St Petersburg (cf. Marsden 2015b).

Yiwu is known and talked about by Afghan traders in all these contexts. On hearing of my interest in Afghan trading networks a man who is originally from Jebul Siraj in northern Afghanistan (who now invests in petrol pumps in Khujand, Tajikistan) remarked to me, ‘the next place you should go is Yiwu in China where there are lots of Afghans – your time will pass well there’. Afghan traders are dispersed across a disparate range of locations, yet they share a collective sense of forming and sustaining trans-regional networks, and of Yiwu as being an important meeting for individual traders.

While Afghan traders in Russia and Ukraine do not themselves use the designation ‘Eurasia’ as a geographical category, they do often comment on the close ties and connections that exist between Afghanistan and the territories of the *shurawi-i sabiq* (former Soviet Union). Indeed, the manner in which they do so suggests the traders consider these settings to collectively constitute a single geographical space. Many traders also say that Afghanistan and the entirety of the ‘former Soviet Union’ (*shurawi-i sabiq*) are neighbours (*hamsayah*) because they share a border with one another (*hamsarhad*). For some of the traders, especially those who were educated in the Soviet Union, the people who live in the *shurawi-i sabiq* also share cultural traits that distinguish them collectively from ‘Western Europeans’ (*mardom-i uropuye gharb*). In Ukraine, for example, traders regularly remark that, ‘the Ukrainians and Afghans are similar to one another – we make money to live and be sociable. When we go and see our relatives in Europe we get bored – there is nobody even out on the streets on Sunday!’ For the traders discussed in this article, many of whom have been travelling for more than thirty years in a multi-directional manner between dispersed settings scattered across Afghanistan, China, and the former Soviet Union, Russian and Ukraine, far from being simply ‘European’ countries, are perceived and imagined as constituting Afghanistan’s near abroad.

Eurasian Empires through Diasporic Eyes: Afghan Traders across China and Russia

Members of Afghan trading networks share a great deal of information with one another about their compatriot’s activities in different parts of the world, and have detailed knowledge about the trading activities and everyday lives of these people. Indeed, the traders think of themselves as ‘international persons’ (*odamho-yi bayn-i milalli*) with extensive knowledge of the economic possibilities and nature of everyday life in many different contexts. The knowledge that Afghans hold furthermore is derived from specific practices that the traders deploy in order to gather and disseminate information, and these are especially critical to traders in Yiwu. While Afghan traders based in Yiwu often speak Mandarin, and some have even taken language courses in Chinese universities, most of the visiting traders do not, and therefore rely on such information from their compatriots in order to travel to and move through the city, as well as to find the contacts they need in order to be able to conduct their commercial operations cost effectively. It is normal for visiting Afghans to stay in the ‘offices’ of Yiwu-based Afghans. Afghan traders living in a wide range of settings receive guests and visitors from different parts of the world (cf. Marsden

2012a). This practice saves resources, helps to establish ties of trust, and facilitates information sharing (cf. Constable 2003).

On the one hand, traders travel frequently between different locales in which Afghans live, visiting their former class fellows and relatives. 'We have been dispersed (*ma tit shudim*)', I am often told, 'so we have to travel widely just to stay in touch with our relatives (*khesho*) and friends (*dostho*).' One Afghan trader in Odessa remarked to me indeed that 'we Afghans are, like the Jews, dispersed all over the place'. While the visits that Afghans make to one another are often talked about as being social meetings that sustain ties of friendship and kinship, they also often have an explicit information-finding dimension. A trader might be seeking to source a particular product, assess the economic value of investing in a market, or weigh up an offer made by a friend or companion to form a business partnership. This type of exploratory visit is also often conceived by established traders as being an important learning opportunity for their sons. Rituals of hospitality (*mehmon-dusti*) and the making of shared journeys (*safar*) are both important practices the traders deploy to gain access to information, forge ties of trust, and test the trustworthiness of their partners. Importantly, these practices all bear the influence of an Indo-Persian Islamicate culture in which trade and travel have historically formed two sides of the same coin (e.g. Voll 1994).

Gathering information about world markets and conditions, as well as assessing the trustworthiness of other traders, are recurring discussion topics in Yiwu. Importantly, though, Afghan traders are not one-dimensionally economic actors constantly on the search for profit. Concerns besides those connected to making a profit are the focus of much discussion. In particular, traders discuss the ways in which the nation-states in which they work affect the nature of their activities and daily experiences. Discussions revolving around this theme reveal much about the relationship between traders and the state and underscore the traders' self-understandings of their being actors who inhabit realms that cut-across the international system.

On most evenings in Yiwu a collection of Afghan men gather at Yama's hotel and restaurant in order to play cards, smoke a shisha, and either partake of a plate of Afghan *palaw* or tuck into Yama's famed pizza.⁶ I spent several evenings for example with an Afghan trader based in St Petersburg (Iqbal) who had met-up with a relative (Wasih) visiting Yiwu from Chengdu, where he runs a transport company. Both of the men had served for the Afghan state and armed forces in the years of Soviet influence during the 1980s. They maintain residences in Kabul, only rarely travelling to their ancestral villages close to the town of Jebul Siraj. A further man present during this period was a Moscow-based trader (Halim) visiting the city in order to purchase razor blades for export to Russia.

On the first evening of a series of gatherings, the conversation opened with a discussion of the varying conditions in which expatriate Afghans live. I focus on this discussion here because it reveals the ways in which many of the traders emphasise the forms of connection that tie together Afghanistan, settings in the former Soviet Union and China, and the factors

that mark these out as different from other contexts. Halim, the Moscow-based trader, told those gathered, how he was dismayed with his son's activities in the Welsh city of Cardiff: on the one hand, he said, his son (now in his mid-thirties) has become religious (*mulloh shuda*) – a cause of concern for Halim who claimed to be a 'democrat'. On the other hand, Halim said that his son's religiosity had also affected the young man's business activities: he stayed in Cardiff rather than move to London because he was better able to balance his attempts to lead a pious life with making a livelihood in the Welsh city. Halim reported that he even had to send money to his grown son in the UK: 'I keep telling him', Halim said, 'that you should forget being a mullah and move to London where there are greater possibilities (*imkonot*) for making money' (*paisa jam kardan*).

Halim's remarks reveal how Afghans traders working in the former Soviet Union are often ambiguous about the possibility of combining commitment to public piety with being a successful trader: public forms of piety preclude the possibility of cultivating the forms of social finesse that are required for successful commercial activities in this context (cf. Marsden 2015). By contrast, such forms of finesse are perceived as being less valued 'Western Europe', and this is manifested in distinctions both between people in the *shurawi-i sabiq* and Western Europe and also in the differing behaviour of Afghans settled across these contexts. Afghan traders in Ukraine remark to me how 'strange' they find the avowedly 'religious' behaviour of UK-based Afghans who visit them in Odessa: 'they ask for halol this and halol that, and end up only eating fish'. At a more general level, the traders also say that while it is possible to trade and lead a 'free-life' (*zindagi-i ozod*) in the former Soviet Union, these ambitions are impossible to realise in Western Europe. For many of the traders, moving from the *shurawi-i sabiq* to Western Europe not merely involves crossing geographic, political and cultural boundaries. Rather, migration out of the former Soviet Union also requires a willingness to trade in the critical ambition of working independently as a trader for the willingness to accept state security. On meeting Halim in Moscow a year after we had first met in Yiwu, he told me that if he were to be able to 'close his accounts' (*hisob kitob*) in Russia he could now move to be with his son in London. This was because he was old and no longer had the ambition to trade or 'become something'. As a result, he could 'peacefully' receive financial help from the state and/or his son. The categories through which the traders conceptualise the geographical spaces across which they work are informed thus by the values that animate their modes of making a living. Such categories are dynamic in that they shift in relationship to individual traders' changing positions in generational hierarchies.

The gathered traders thus exchanged views with Hamid (the jewellery factory owner) about the policies of China and Russia towards foreign traders. The topic of conversation then turned to a comparison of the nature of everyday life for Afghans based in China and Russia. Considering the ways in which these traders make comparisons brings attention to the 'images, metaphors and understandings of similarity and difference' that influence their 'social relations and actions with neighbors and in a region' (Busse 2005, 455-6). Both of the

Russia-based traders (Halim and Hamid) agreed that life for foreigners was becoming increasingly difficult in Russia due to wave of xenophobic nationalism. Yet the men evaluated the situation of Afghans in China differently. Halim exclaimed that, by contrast to Russia, China was a paradise (*janot*) for Afghans: the Communist Party ensured that there was control and order yet that, as foreign traders, they were allowed to do as they pleased (such as sit openly in an Afghan restaurant, something, that is said to be unthinkable for Afghans in Moscow). Leading an enjoyable public social life is indeed an important aspect of the traders' conception of a well-lived life (Marsden 2015a). China, he went on to say, 'is both communist and capitalist and therefore perfect for us'.

The China-based traders are aware that the conditions of life for them in Yiwu are very different as compared to other Chinese cities where foreign traders are regarded with greater suspicion by the authorities (e.g. Haider 2005). Hamid asserted that it was only because men such as themselves brought money to China that they were able to spend their time well in the country:

Were we to enter the country as refugees (*muhojir*) – as we did in Russia thirty years previously – ours' would be a different story. At least every time we come here we spend at the very least \$30,000 on whatever it is we buy – that is why the Chinese are good to us now: if we came as refugees it wouldn't be paradise.

In Urumqi, the headquarters of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region traders of Afghan background say indeed that they are constantly at risk of being accused of either drug smuggling or terrorist offences. Traders of Afghan background who travel to China by road from Pakistan, mostly in order either to purchase goods for export to Pakistan in the trade of semi-precious gems (especially mock amber, rubies, emeralds and tourmaline), are advised by those with experience of trade in Xinjiang not to identify themselves as or spend time with 'Afghans'.⁷ Traders recognise Yiwu's particularity within China as an international city in which Muslims from a wide variety of contexts are provided the scope to engage in commerce and interact with one another.

China-based Afghan traders also say that their interactions with Chinese state authorities are frequently fraught and costly. Wasih told the gathered men about the specific issues that faced traders in China. Many of the traders currently based in Yiwu have spent time in Urumqi, because, until recently, there was a regular flight connecting the city to Kabul: this meant that several Afghan trading and transport companies were established in a hotel there, and that many traders coming to China sought visa sponsorship through these. Urumqi's significance as a centre for Afghans to provision commodities for export has declined as their trading activities have shifted to Yiwu and other cities in southern China such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In addition, purportedly as a result of a terrorist threat made to a plane in 2009, there is no longer a flight connecting Kabul to Urumqi. Nevertheless, Afghan traders originally issued visas on the basis of their connections to Urumqi must continue to travel there and even maintain residences and offices in it in order

to renew their visas. The traders frequently complain that the Chinese authorities are making it more difficult and costly for people with Afghan passports to travel and live in the country. It is also often bitterly remarked that no matter how long an Afghan lives in China, or how deep their ties become to local communities, such as through marriage to Chinese women, they will never be given permanent documents to stay in the country let alone Chinese citizenship. For merchants seeking to establish a permanent foothold outside of Afghanistan this makes China a less attractive country to be based than settings such as Ukraine which whilst economically unstable are perceived as offering easier routes to citizenship or permanent residency.

Afghan traders regularly explain the different ways in which they are treated by the officials and immigration policies of varying nation-states in relationship to geopolitical processes. While some traders do say that Afghans are simplistically treated as heroin-smugglers and terrorists, they also argue that the Chinese authorities treat them harshly because of international politics. According to this theory, the Chinese mistrust Afghans because they have provided a base for the Europeans and Americans in Asia: 'if the foreigners leave Afghanistan', I was told by a man in his early thirties who exports clothes from Guangzhou to Mazar-i Sharif in Afghanistan, 'then the situation of Afghans in China will undoubtedly improve'. In a manner that is reminiscent of the ways in which the mobile Muslims studied by Seema Alavi in the 19th century carved out a cosmopolitan trans-regional world that cut-across imperial assemblages but was not simply anti-colonial (Alavi 2015), the history of international relations are also layered into the self-understandings of Afghan traders.

The traders repeatedly emphasise how their fortunes depend on the past and future strategies, tactics and rivalries between nation-states and empires, as well as their own ability to gather and use knowledge about these. Iqbal runs a business in St Petersburg's Apraksin Dvor market, yet, thanks to working in partnership with his brothers and developing an internet sales system, is able to proudly tell his compatriots in Yiwu that he has 'a life in Kabul and a life in Moscow'. During the course of the conversation between the traders in Yiwu, Iqbal was keen to remind Afghans based in Russia how much they owed to the country in general and to President Putin in particular:

Russia - either out of regret for what happened in the past or for some future political strategy has given the Afghans the greatest gift they could have wished for – the Sevastopol Hotel trading complex. Without the support of Russia and the room for manoeuvre that the authorities have given to Afghans we would not be where we are today. Look how Mr Putin has turned the country's fortunes around from the chaos of the 1990s to the strong and wealthy country that Russia is today.

Later that evening, Iqbal told me that the current century would see the countries of the West (*gharb*) becoming increasingly weak and by those of the East (*shark*) growing in wealth and power because young people in the former only wanted to spend their money on holidays (*tafrih*) as opposed to 'working hard and building up their countries'. As with other traders we have met in this article, Iqbal conceptualises the territories of the former

Soviet Union as belonging to a geographical space that is connected to Asia, rather than being a part of the West or '*uropoye gharb*' (Western Europe). Hamid however added a more pragmatic angle to the discussion stating, 'the successes of Afghan traders in Russia and Ukraine would not have been possible without the flexibility that the authorities in these countries have demonstrated in towards the regulation of such trade'. For these traders, knowledge of international relations and the capacity to respond to developments in the field are critical to their collective and individual fortunes as well as to their self-understandings.

Conclusion

This article has sought to bring scholarly attention to trans-regional networks of Afghan traders that span from Yiwu in China to a range of settings across the former Soviet Union and Western Europe. Yiwu itself is a global trading node at which traders from very different backgrounds and who work at diverse levels and scales interact. By focusing on the presence of Afghan traders in Yiwu I have sought to present a perspective in Afghanistan's relations with other parts of Asia that departs from the more familiar narrative of refugee flows. The article has also pointed toward insights that considerations of Asian nodes of interaction and trans-regional networks stand to bring to the study of Central Asia. Anchoring the study of such networks in the biographies of these Afghan traders has demonstrated the importance of both their past involvement in historic trading networks and their divergent experiences of modern forms of globalisation to their formation as global commodity traders. The worlds created and inhabited by Afghan traders have been forged though not exclusively shaped by a 'distinctively Indo-Islamic sense of community' that has interacted with trans-regional understandings of being Afghan and international forms of socialism. More broadly, if the traders do not directly use the category of Eurasia in order to label the geographical contexts in which they work, then many do conceive of the territories of the former Soviet Union as being contiguous with Afghanistan and other Asian settings, including China. By contrast, 'Western Europe' is regarded as constituting a distinct type of geographical space, and, importantly, one that requires skills and sensibilities of a different in nature from those deployed by Afghans who seek to make a living and pass a well-lived life in their country's near abroad.

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¹ Traders in comparable trans-regional contexts also inhabit create cultural worlds that demonstrate their adeptness at 'interethnic cooperation' (Kahn 2008: 273-273). Cf. Marsden and Ibañez-Tirado 2015.

² See Hess (2009) on Uyghur migration in China; on Central Asia's Uyghur communities, see Bellér Hann (2007).

³ Following anthropological convention, I use pseudonyms throughout this text.

⁴ On traders' understandings of the well-lived life, see Marsden (2015a).

⁵⁵ On 28th November 2014 a cargo train left Yiwu for Madrid arriving 21 days later (Ridley 2014).

⁶ On food's significance for Afghan migrant identity see Monsutti (2010).

⁷ Afghans bring semi-precious stones to China from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other Asian nodes of the gem trade such as Bangkok.